

## **Sermon: When things get tough**

I wish I could tell you that when you come to Jesus, all your problems will be over. I wish I could tell you that when you give your life to God, it will all be clear sailing. I wish I could tell you that following Jesus means a quiet life and an easy road. But I can't tell you any of those things, because I would be lying. Life is tough for everyone, Christians included.

In fact, in some ways life for the Christian can be even tougher, because God tells you to do hard things. Let me tell you right now, if you are a follower of Jesus, you are going to face some tough times in life. Jesus said: "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

And so, as we look at this miracle of Jesus walking on the water today, I would like to give you three things to remember when you are going through a tough time. Three things to remember when the going gets tough: 1) You are never out of God's sight, 2) You are never out of God's reach, and 3) You are never out of God's care. Everyone goes through tough times in life. But when you are a Christian, you have these three promises from God to help you when the going gets tough.

First of all, you are never out of God's sight. The disciples were in a tough spot. They were out in the middle of the Sea of Galilee at night fighting a strong headwind and not making any headway. But how did they get into this spot?

Matthew tells us that Jesus sent them there.

Jesus "made" his disciples get into the boat. This is a very strong word in the original language meaning "to force someone or compel." Now I don't think Jesus threatened the disciples or used physical force, but he certainly commanded them to get into the boat and go on ahead of him. And so, the disciples were in a tight spot because they were following Jesus' commands.

So much for the idea that following Jesus will never get you into trouble. But the important thing to remember here is that just because you are in a tough spot does not mean that you are not in the right spot. You could be exactly where God wants you to be. Sometimes following Jesus means going through trials. Jesus made the disciples get into the boat and go ahead of him because he had a purpose for the trial they would face.

So, Jesus sends the disciples across the sea in the boat, he dismisses the crowd, and then he goes up on the mountain to pray.

When evening came, he was there alone, but the boat was already a considerable distance from land, buffeted by the waves because the wind was against it.

You might wonder how Jesus knew what the disciples were going through. So, the disciples are stuck in the middle of the lake fighting the winds, and Jesus is up on the mountainside praying. Was he praying for the disciples? We don't know. But as he looked down on the Sea of Galilee, he saw the disciples in their predicament.

I believe this is actually the first of four miracles we find in this passage. The Sea of Galilee is about four miles across, and so the disciples were at least two miles away at this time. Now maybe on a clear day with calm seas from an elevated position you might just possibly make out a small boat on a lake from two miles away. I doubt you could identify the boat or its occupants, but you might be able to spot it. But at nighttime with the wind whipping up the water and the waves? There's not a chance.

And so, I believe a miracle of seeing takes place here. Jesus somehow is able to look out over the lake and see the disciples straining at the oars.

But whether this was a miracle of seeing or not, the principle for us is the same. You are never out of God's sight. You might feel like you are stuck out in the middle of nowhere far away from God's watchful eye, but it's not true. God sees it all. He knows your situation. He knows what you're going through. Whenever you are in a tough spot, remember this. You are never out of God's sight.

And then, secondly, you are never out of God's reach.

During the fourth watch of the night Jesus went out to them, walking on the lake.

Jesus was on land, and the disciples were out in the middle of the lake. It would seem they were out of Jesus' reach, but then Jesus comes walking right out to them. Now this is the big miracle of the story – Jesus walking on the water.

Jesus, walking on top of the water, was demonstrating his power over nature and his own true nature as the Son of God.

When the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified. "It's a ghost," they said, and "cried out in fear."

Here are the disciples, stuck in the middle of the lake, and Jesus comes to help them, but they don't recognize him. They cannot comprehend a human being walking on the water, so they assume he must be a ghost.

You are never out of God's reach, but sometimes you don't recognize it when God comes to rescue you. Sometimes God's rescue seems frightening, because you don't understand it all. God can be right there ready to help you, but you also need to be ready to respond.

You need to realize that wherever you go, God is there.

You might feel like you are stuck in the middle of the lake going nowhere, far away from any help or rescue, but remember, God is always there. You are never out of God's reach.

You are never out of God's sight. You are never out of God's reach. And finally, you are never out of God's care.

But Jesus immediately said to them: "Take courage! It is I. Don't be afraid." "Lord, if it's you," Peter replied, "tell me to come to you on the water." "Come," he said.

The disciples are terrified. They think Jesus is a ghost, but Jesus tells them, "It's me. Don't be afraid." And then Peter says to Jesus, "Lord, if it's really you, tell me to come to you on the water." Jesus tells Peter, "Come." And Peter does! He gets out of the boat and starts walking on the water toward Jesus.

This is now the third miracle in the passage. First Jesus sees the disciples out in the middle of the lake in the middle of the night in the middle of the wind and the waves. Then Jesus comes walking on the water out to the disciples in the middle of the lake. Now Jesus allows Peter to come walking on the water in the midst of the wind and the waves.

Can you imagine the faith it took for Peter to step out of the boat? Can you imagine what he must have been thinking when he first touched his foot to the water and then put the rest of his weight onto it? Can you imagine how awesome it must have been to suddenly find yourself walking on the water towards Jesus in the midst of the wind and the waves?

I love Peter, because he is always saying or doing big, bold things for Jesus, and then immediately messing up right after.

And Peter does it again here! He goes from one of the high points in his life to one of the low points. Here he is, walking on the water with Jesus, and then he takes another look at the wind. He is suddenly afraid, and he starts to sink.

And so, he does the only thing he can do. He cries out, "Lord, save me!" And Jesus does! Jesus reaches out his hand and catches him before he sinks down beneath the surface of the waves. "You of little faith," Jesus tells him, "Why did you doubt?"

There's a lot we can learn from Peter here. First, there is the lesson of faith.

When you trust Jesus, God can do big and beautiful things in your life. The life of faith is a life of adventure! So often we want God to do amazing things in our lives, but we're afraid to take that first step of faith.

Then, there is the lesson of focus.

You need to keep your eyes on Jesus. It's great when you take that first step of faith, but don't forget about the second and third and fourth steps, too. Peter did fine as long as he kept his eyes on Jesus. But he got into trouble when he lost his focus and started looking at the wind instead. Don't lose your focus! Keep your eyes on Jesus, not on your problems.

And then thirdly, there is the lesson of forgiveness.

God loves and forgives you even when you fail. Even when you lose faith, even when you lose focus, even when you mess up big time, you just need to call out: "Lord, save me!" and Jesus is right there to help you back into the boat.

And so, we have these three great lessons of faith, focus and forgiveness: 1) Faith: God can do amazing things in your life; 2) Focus: Keep your eyes on Jesus, not on your problems; 3) Forgiveness: God loves you and forgives you even when you fail.

And then Jesus and Peter get back into the boat with the rest of the disciples, and that's when the fourth miracle in this passage occurs.

Jesus and Peter get back into the boat and immediately the winds die down and everything is calm again. Those who are in the boat worship Jesus, saying, "Truly you are the Son of God."

Jesus loved and cared for Peter when he was sinking in the water. Jesus loved and cared for his disciples when they were fighting against the wind in the boat. You are never out of God's care.

Matthew finishes off this section with a summary passage of Jesus' healing ministry.

The disciples thought Jesus was a ghost at first. The people recognize Jesus as soon as he comes ashore. The disciples lacked faith and lost focus. The people look to Jesus and believe that he can help them. They go running all over the place bringing their sick to Christ. They believe they can be healed even by just touching the edge of his cloak, and all who touched him were healed.

Once again Jesus' love and compassion shine through as he goes about healing the common people and ministering to their needs. The message is clear. God loves you. He wants the best for you. You are never out of God's care.

You know, when we talk about God, we often talk about how God is all-knowing, he is all-present, and he is all-powerful.

Perhaps you are going through a difficult time right now. Perhaps you feel like you have been stuck out in the middle of the lake for a long time. Maybe you feel like God has forgotten you, or he has abandoned you, or he just doesn't care.

That's when you need to remember these three things. You are never out of God's sight, and so that means God has not forgotten you. You are never out of God's reach, and so that means God has not abandoned you. You are never out of God's care, because God loves you so much, he sent his Son to die for you. He is the all-knowing, all-present, all-powerful, all-loving God who knows your troubles and will rescue you in his perfect timing.

So, don't lose focus! Keep your eyes on Jesus, not on your problems. Trust him. Believe him. Step boldly out into a life of faith and adventure. And when the going gets tough, remember. You are never out of God's sight. You are never out of God's reach. You are never out of God's care. Amen